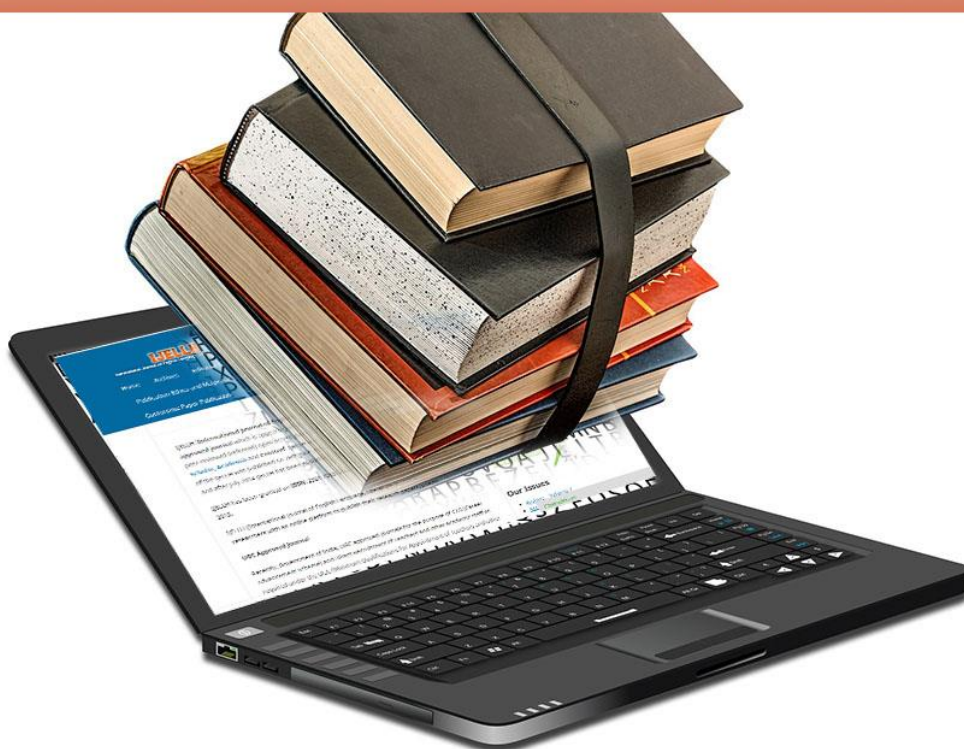


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### Helen of Troy in Antiquity

#### Abstract

In this paper, we comprehend the most captivating mythical figure of ancient greek literature, the queen Helen of Troy in the two works of Homer: *Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Helen, who is stunningly attractive, comes out as a symbol of duality wearing contradictory characteristics. Bearing the beauty of 'immortal goddesses', Homer depicts Helen weaving the story of war in *Iliad*. Helen of antiquity is not thoroughly unblamed, rather is depicted as willing and rational in her participation in the Trojan war. Though in *The Odyssey*, this beautiful queen is depicted as a chaste wife, generous, intelligent and softened.

Keywords - Controversy, Greek literature, Helen of Troy, Homer

Helen of Troy, the daughter of Zeus and Leda, in some contexts, is often quoted as the most beautiful woman of antiquity whereas a mythical figure of void appearance in others. Her abduction by (or elopement with) Trojan prince Paris not only led to the downfall of Troy and ten year Trojan war but also to twenty eight centuries of drama and poetry. Her depiction in ancient works is varied and complicated. The way these ancient authors (from Homer to Socrates) talk about Helen, it becomes difficult to understand their attitude towards her. In this

essay, we'll try to capture the elusiveness of this character and the contradictions that lie behind this mythical figure by taking evidence from source texts (Homer's *Iliad* and *The Odyssey*) and we will support our judgements based on few reference texts.

The representation of Helen by Homer in his poems crosses the boundaries, not only between nations but also between the world of men and women. Homer presents her beauty as that of "immortal goddesses" because she herself is half-divine (Hom. *Il.* 3.158) and she is often connected with Aphrodite. What is unique about the case of Helen's beauty is that all judgments go just alike. Her beauty might be subjective but it is felt as an objectivity perceived by all (Maguire 76). Despite her immense beauty, she scorns her second husband, Paris and longs for what she left behind. Menelaus considers her as a victim, and even Priam exonerates her completely by blaming the gods. (Hom. *Il.* 3.164). She blames herself, by cursing her birth (Hom. *Il.* 6.344-48) and wishes that she had never betrayed her husband.

“..if only death had pleased me then, grim death,  
that day I followed your son to Troy, forsaking  
my marriage bed, my kinsmen and my child,  
my favorite, now full-grown,  
and the lovely comradeship of women my own age.”  
(Hom. *Il.* 3.143-8)

Helen also presides over scenes of combat as she catalogues the Greek warriors for Priam (Hom. *Il.* 3.233-44), thus making her the first character in epic to straddle the dividing line between genders (Suzuki 92-151). Much like her cousin Penelope, Homer depicts Helen as the weaver of plots, while weaving the story of war (Hom. *Il.* 3.123-8). Sometimes Helen seems to be remorseful for the way being fought over her but on the other occasion, she declares that she will be remembered in a song. At one moment, she is cursing Paris's name but the next moment she is accompanying him (Hom. *Il.* 315-368). She seems to be speaking

herself of an evil woman with hardly any sense of morality or remorse. In *Iliad*, She is portrayed as beautiful, desperate, lonely and slavish women who is hated by most of the Greeks and a large majority of Trojans.

In *The Odyssey*, Helen is no longer seen as wild mistress but only a chaste wife whose scandal has now softened. She is also quite intelligent perhaps even prophetic. She is the first person to recognize Telemachus is Odysseus' son (Hom. *Od.* 4.150-4). She graciously tells him stories of Odysseus and managing not to start any wars throughout the entire dinner conversation by using mind-altering drug. Later, she gifts Telemachus a dress for his future wife to wear at the "lovely occasion of marriage." (Hom. *Od.* 15.139-46) She acts out of kindness and compassion which signals the Helen's transformation from a woman of passion to chaste wife.

Everyone viewed Helen in different ways, some judged her by looks while others by wit thus leading to the blame game. Menelaus was startled by the beauty of Helen in first sight. Menelaus was

"planning to kill her . . . but lovely Aphrodite restrained his strength, knocked the sword from his hand, and checked his attack. She removed his black jealousy from him and roused sweet desire in his heart and eyes. An unexpected amazement came upon him, and when he saw Helen's conspicuous beauty, he could no longer bring himself to strike her neck with his sword."

(Maguire 52)

The Chorus in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* makes Helen's agency clear that Helen is an active participant in her own abduction, there are no emotional impediments or physical obstacles. Eumaeus, like Hector in *Iliad*, who wishes Paris dead, wishes the same for Helen. His master is dead and gone. He wishes he could say the same of Helen and all her breed, for she has been the death of many a good man (Hom. *Od.* 14.76). Euripides' *Electra* accused

Helen of lasciviousness, deriving her anger from the loss of her father in the aftermath of war Helen caused. Many characters were reluctant to say anything about her due to her course of actions that led to war, causing linguistic vacancies in literature. In Orestes, Pylades called Helen 'that woman'. In book 3 of the Aeneid Andromache talks of "Hermione, the granddaughter of Leda", bypassing Hermione's mother, Helen, altogether (Maguire 14).

However, Helen still remains a symbol for doubleness. Literature and artwork give us drastically differing views of Helen. In some artworks, Helen is seen as a shameful woman, who has willingly abandoned her family for the dishonorable Paris whereas in others she is seen as an innocent victim, who can do nothing to avoid her capture. In one vase, she is seen fleeing from her rightful husband Menelaus whereas the other vase showcases a flirtatious scene of Helen and Paris. We can clearly observe from the Homer literature that Helen doesn't obtain a unified perspective.

All the same, Helen is cast with remarkable frequency as a burdened soul who finds it hard to recognize her own identity, in the work of both those who stick to the Trojan version and those who adopt the Egyptian variant. One of the first times he mentions Helen Homer speaks of her 'sobs'. And the distress of the innocent Helen in Euripides' play is immense.

(Brunel 529)

The more one digs into the character of Helen, the more conflicts one discovers about her nature. Different viewpoints were taken by poets since *Iliad* but it seems that Homer himself was unsure of which route to take with this controversial character. According to me, this dissonance makes Helen who she is. She embodies both the aspects of this controversy, its allure as well as its threat, its glorious splendor as well as its destructiveness and what is certain is that Helen of Troy will continue to be as she has always been, a paragon for female characters and one of the most captivating figures of the ancient world

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